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SYSTEM PERMITTING THE DISPLAY OF VIDEO OR STILL IMAGE CONTENT ON SELECTED DISPLAYS OF AN ELECTRONIC DISPLAY NETWORK ACCORDING TO CUSTOMER DICTATES

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This application is a continuation in part of Ser. No. 09/301,102, filed Apr. 28, 1999 pending.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to the display of video or still image content on electronic displays. More particularly, the invention relates to a network of thousands of electronic displays, such as electronic billboards or electronic digital movie displays, and a related system that permits display of content on selected displays according to customer dictates.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Background, Advertising/Billboards

Consumer product advertising takes many forms, such as television commercials, newspaper and magazine advertisements, mailings, point-of-sale displays, outdoor billboards, etc. Using current advertising media, advertisers engage in a constant struggle to efficiently use their budgets to most effectively reach their geographic and demographic targets.

Focusing on the outdoor advertising component of advertising by consumer product companies, it is well known that outdoor billboards have traditionally taken the form of single-message displays formed of printed sheets or painted surfaces containing the advertising content adhered to a flat backing. This time-honored outdoor advertising technique has remained essentially unchanged throughout the twentieth century. The high cost of printing, transporting and mounting a message on a conventional billboard has dictated that the same message remain in place for a considerable period of time. Thus, a conventional billboard cannot be readily changed to reflect current events within the geographic area of the billboard. Additionally, the content on a conventional billboard tends to become essentially "invisible" as a part of the landscape after its content has been in place for a relatively short period of time, especially to commuters and others who regularly pass the billboard. Beyond the above problems with cost, single-message content, lack of content changeover capability, and the like, conventional outdoor billboards have come under increasing criticism because in their large numbers, and often tattered condition, they clutter highways with a distasteful form of visual "pollution". A reduction in the number of billboards and improvement of the appearance of those that remain, if accomplished while increasing the overall advertising impact afforded by outdoor advertising, would please virtually everyone.

The use of electronic billboards has been suggested, for example, in U.S. Pat. No. 5,612,741. However, there is no electronic billboard network in operation whereby commercial advertisers may directly place ads onto selected billboards at selected times through direct access to a master network. Such a network, properly designed and operated, promises to overcome the numerous disadvantages currently associated with the outdoor advertising industry, while also meeting the above needs of consumer products advertisers. Background, Distribution and Display of Movies at Movie Theaters

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For virtually the entire twentieth century the practice of distributing movies on film reels to movie theaters has gone fundamentally unchanged. As is well known, movie content is stored on large reels of film, one or more copies of which must be physically transported to each movie theater where the movie will be shown. The films are bulky, heavy, and expensive to reproduce and ship to movie theaters. Films also show wear and eventually must be removed from use. Obviously, a movie theater's ability to show a particular movie is subject to the film reels being physically present at the proper time. Thus, substantial lead time must be provided anytime a movie theater operator is preparing the schedule for his screen(s).

In addition to the above problems inherent in the current movie distribution scheme, the high cost of conventional film reel movie distribution results in most movies not going to full distribution. In this regard, the full distribution of a movie (the cost of film reels, transportation, etc.) can run up to four to five million dollars or more. As a related problem, the cost of making film reels of older movies, particularly non-"blockbuster" movies, available on an ongoing basis is prohibitive. Thus, theater owners and movie goers are deprived of movie theater screening for the vast majority of available movie content because the movies are not in current distribution. Importantly, as well, content providers (e.g., Disney, Warner Brothers, etc.) are deprived of the revenue from the movies for which ongoing, continuous distribution is simply too expensive.

There is an acute need for a new movie distribution system for the twenty first century that will overcome the above shortcomings of current movie distribution practices.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention, in one broad respect, is a system that permits video (e.g., movies) or still image content to be displayed on selected ones of multiple, networked electronic displays at selected times according to dictates of the customers of the system.

According to one implementation of the invention, commercial advertisers, such as consumer product companies and the advertising agents that represent them, directly access a network of multiple, large, high resolution electronic displays located in high traffic areas and directly send their own advertisements electronically to the network to be displayed at locations and times selected by the advertisers. In preferred embodiments, this implementation of the invention includes a central information processing center that permits customers to review a schedule of times and electronic display locations that are available for placement of advertisements, and also permits customers to purchase available times at selected electronic display locations for placement of their advertising content. The customer then transmits his video or still image advertising content to the processing center where the content is reviewed for appropriateness and then transmitted to the customer-selected electronic display(s). The electronic displays preferably are large (e.g., 23x33½ ft.) flat LED displays that are driven by their own video or image servers. Verification that the advertisements run as ordered is facilitated by an information storage module or, more preferably, by a digital camera or series of digital cameras. A traffic counter may be used to determine the traffic that passed by the display while the advertisement was running. Bills and reports containing market and demographic analysis are generated and sent to the customer.

In another implementation of the invention, the operators of digital movie theaters have ongoing, continuous access to